

Blind to Joy

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Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

Luke 19:29-40

Let me begin with two short texts of Scripture

Zechariah 9: (9, 10):

*Look! Your King Comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth.*

and John 12.13:

*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna!’ (in Hebrew = “Lord, Save Us!”)
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!’*

The last week of Jesus’ life can be described as

- a couple of mountain tops – filled with pure joy
- and a deep dark valley – filled with pain and anguish

The valley is Good Friday, when Jesus is crucified

The 2 mountain tops are Easter when Jesus rises from the dead

And Palm Sunday -- the Sunday before Easter -- is when Jesus rides down the Mt. of Olives into Jerusalem seated on a donkey with a parade of adults and children surrounding him waving palm branches and shouting hosanna -- people filled with overflowing joy!

Which, of course, begs the question . . . “*What’s going on?*”

- The joy of Easter we can understand: Jesus is alive! Unbelievable! A miracle! Life from the dead! . . . Time to celebrate!
- But the “joy” Palm Sunday? . . . hen the awfulness of Good Friday is looming just a few days away? When, like us with Corona, we’re just waiting for things *to get worse* OR even for *all hell* to break loose?

What’s going on?

Well, let me set the scene by going back in history

- Somewhere between 150 and 200 years before this particular time,
- To be precise, to 141 B.C. and then, even further, to 167 B.C.

If you were in the land of Israel (at that time called Judah), or in the city of Jerusalem on particular days in those years you would have seen two other processions in which (like our Palm Sunday) there was the waving of palm branches.

- One of those parades celebrated the deliverance of God’s people from foreign oppression and taxation
- and the other procession celebrated the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem from desecration by the king of Syria – Antiochus IV Epiphanies (Antiochus took this name “Epiphanies” because he believed he was the epiphany or manifestation of the Greek god, Zeus)

This desecration by Antiochus took place over a period of 7 years with the sending of troops to Jerusalem, and with various attempts to change Jerusalem into what he would have considered to be a “modern” city: pulling it out of the past, out of its heritage, out of its Jewishness and into the ethos of the Mediterranean world, the modern world, as he would have seen it, dominated by the cultures of Greece and Rome.

And to do this . . .

- He built new buildings in Jerusalem
- and brought all kinds of different events to the city

(including athletic events that included public nudity which would have been anathema to the Jews)

And **at the climax** of everything that he did, in the year 167 BC, he took his final step:

he banned the practice of Jewish worship for the Jews! In their own temple; in their own holy city.
he banned their worship, **and instead** -- he erected **in the temple itself** an altar to the Greek god, Zeus.

And all hell did, in fact, break loose. Antiochus thought that he had more power than he had; that nobody – nobody -- would rise up against his power.

But his action set off a firestorm, that led to the loss of his colony

- just as a firestorm would be set off today in Jerusalem at the Dome of the Rock or the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the temple mount if somebody set up **any kind of altar** to any other god *than* the one true God.
- Muslims and Jews and Christians would all rise up in protest together at what they would consider to be sacrilege!

So if you can imagine **the fragility of the Middle East today**, then you can imagine the kind of turmoil, the kind of fire that was lit by Antiochus’ action.

And **a fire was lit indeed!** A revolt took place, an *intifada*, if you like, religious and a cultural and a political war began with the most unlikely figures taking the lead: a family of country priests given the name “Maccabee” or “hammer” – they took the lead, fighting against the mighty power of the Syrian king and his armies.

[Shaye Cohen, Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard, says **this was history’s first recorded struggle for religious liberty** (in his *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*).]

And against all the odds **they won**. Judas Maccabeus and his brothers won the day.

The **Book of 2nd Maccabees** records the first victory, the purification of the temple like this (2 Macc.10:1-8, edited)

Judas Maccabeus and his followers under the leadership of the Lord recaptured the temple in the city of Jerusalem.

They tore down the altars which foreigners had set up.

They purified the temple and built a new altar.

After they had done all this **they lay face down on the ground and prayed**

-- that the Lord would never again let such disaster strike them. . . .

They rededicated the temple on the 25th day of the month of Kislev, the very same day of the month on which the temple had been desecrated by the Gentiles.

**But now they were carrying ivy-wreathed wands,
and beautiful branches,**

and also “fronds of PALMS” -- singing grateful praises to God

who had brought about the purification of his own temple . . .

-- and everyone agreed that the entire Jewish nation should celebrate this festival every year . . . which they have done from that day to this.

[DR: This is the origin of Hanukkah].

But this was only “Round 1”: The temple had been purified *but not all* of their enemies had been defeated. It took a further *twenty-three years* for Judah to be no longer a conquered or a client state, owing tribute or taxes to their conquerors and occupiers.

So, the revolt continued for twenty three years more until there was another parade, recorded for us in **1st Maccabees 13**, where we read:

On the 23rd day of the second month there was a great celebration in the city because this terrible threat to the security of Israel had come to an end.

Simon Maccabeus and his men [**Simon** is Judas' brother; Judas was now dead] entered the fort [in Jerusalem]

singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving . . .

*. . . while **carrying palm branches** . . .*

and playing harps and cymbals and lyres.

And *with this event* very quickly Simon Maccabeus, was named

- both “high priest”
- and the ruler of the people (the “ethnarch”): the conquering victorious king.

And There is no doubt that every detail of these stories would have been known by the people who lived in Jerusalem when Jesus lived. Not just by the adults but by the children as well.

- The stories would have been *read and re-read, told and retold*, and everybody would have known the details of what had happened in their holy city less than 200 years before:
- It would be like telling stories from 1776 and Paul Revere or George Washington; or from 9/11 and the attack on New York and the Pentagon; or – *in future years* – stories that will be told from the Pandemic of 2020.
- All you needed was a hint and everyone would know *how to fill in the blanks*

So that – *when Jesus* chose to descend the Mount of Olives

- sitting on a donkey
- with crowds waving Palm branches and singing

He knew, and people knew, exactly what he was doing.

- Not only was he *deliberately fulfilling the biblical prophecy of Zechariah 9*, that said . . .

*“Look! Your King Comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,*

The one

Who shall command peace to the nations;

and Whose dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth

- BUT they knew too, that Jesus was re-enacting the parades and processions of a century or two before and that the implicit but obvious *claim* was that ***Jesus was just like the Maccabean heroes, Simon and Judas***
 - God’s high priest
 - the one who would purify the worship of God’s people
 - and bring them back into the presence of God
 - and, then God’s king
 - who would know the best direction for their lives,
 - and who, against all the odds, (*odds far less probable than those of the Maccabees*), would deliver God’s people – and set them free.

It was a moment of overflowing hope and joy. And the crowd could feel it!! And spontaneously erupted into song. We read in Luke 19:

the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen → saying
*“Blessed is **the king** who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”
Hosanna in the highest!*

- God in charge! God at work!
- **Even at THIS moment -- when the very next week, around the corner . . . “The truly awful” was about to happen**
-

But . . . NOT EVERYONE WAS QUITE SO HAPPY . . .

Luke’s account tells us that

39Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him,
“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

To which Jesus responded with a resounding “NO!”

40*“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

As if he were saying to these joyless people

Don’t you get it? All of creation has been waiting for this moment

- *THE COMING OF GOD’S KING . . .*
- *THE COMING OF GOD’S LEADER*

And you’re upset?

- *You’re blind!*
- *Not only to the importance of this moment!*
- *BUT to the unshakable Joy that God longs to give to you!*

And why? . . . Why this blindness?

1. Well, I suppose that to some of these people

- They may well have wanted A king of some kind but the king they wanted wasn’t Jesus
- Indeed, to some, I’m sure that Jesus didn’t appear to them to be a king at all . . . after all -- his fling with power looked for all the world as if it was about to end in disaster

And in some ways this is a pretty reasonable and rationale position to take -- and that *all of us* need to think about . . . including those of us who have been Christians from childhood

- Why is it that I think that Jesus is “the one” who deserves my allegiance more than any other?
- What does he do that others don’t do?
- What does he bring to the world and our lives that no one else can bring?

For me . . . as a teenager

When I first made a commitment to Jesus as my own King

- It was his mercy that grabbed me: *I needed his forgiveness*
- But I also needed the friendship he offered, linked to the promise in Hebrews 13 that he would never fail me or forsake me

-- and from that day to this, through many a stormy time he never has
-- and even in this pandemic, I believe he never will

- And to add to that – **since then**, I am *more convinced than ever* that Jesus is the King because I’m *more convinced than ever* that Easter is TRUE . . . that Jesus’ life didn’t just end with his death, but that God brought him back to life in the body . .

But whatever *my* reasons for naming Jesus “king,” it’s critical that YOU – WE – think this through (and especially, since we have time: at THIS time!

So, **to some people**, they missed the joy of the moment because it didn’t seem to them that Jesus was *the king* . . .

2. Whereas for others, my guess is that they were actually **opposed to kingship in general**. That is: they *loved their own autonomy* and *wanted no one else to control their lives but themselves*.

The late Paul Little tells of a story on a college campus where he had explained the faith to a group of students. One of the students nodded affirmatively at everything he said. Then Paul Little asked “*So, are you going to commit your life to Christ.*” To which the student said “*Oh no!*” Paul was confused and said “*Can I ask why not?*” “*Sure,*” the student replied – “*it would mess up my life!*”

Paul Little, Know Why you Believe, IVP, p.4.

The issue for this student, was not truth . . but autonomy. He wanted to run his own life, and believed that taking Jesus seriously would somehow *mess up his life and steal his joy rob him of the good life, the best life.*

- Mess up his life? – YES!! SURE!! Every king does that! Including Jesus!
- BUT steal his joy? NO! NO! NO!

Joy is a gift of God’s presence by his Spirit that Jesus the King wants to give everyone . . . indeed, one, that he wants his people to have *especially* when danger looms ahead around the corner, as it did with him, and as it *may well do* with us too.

The valley of Good Friday was coming. But so too was the “mountain top” of Easter . . . and while the suffering of “the valley” would be great *and real*, what Jesus believed, and what he wanted the Palm Sunday crowd to believe on this mountain top day, was

- that the looming darkness of the valley doesn’t have the final word
- that God the KING was greater than the suffering (and)
- was fully capable of leading those who would give him their full allegiance to victory through it all

-- even if the worst should happen . . as, in his case, it did.

DO YOU BELIEVE THIS? DO YOU SEE IT?

- That Your King has come? and that this king
- Is THE ONE and ONLY ONE *who holds your life and its future* SAFELY in the PALMS of his hands?

There is no better day than PALM SUNDAY to leave our blindness behind and to FIND HIS JOY by placing our trust in “Jesus The King.”

For the first time, or again . . .

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